Natural-Born Proud

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It’s funny how experiences shape people’s lives. Some of them fade from the memory, drift away, get fuzzy around the edges, as if the light of recollection gets dim in places, bringing back only outlines, shapes or fragments. Others remain part of the consciousness in such pristine form that they merge with the perpetual present we live in, standing out, clear, sharp and whole, firm and palpable, distinct like a warm light focused right in the center of our foreheads. Picking and choosing among experiences and memories, as if deciding which clothes to wear, often leads to fractured, unstable personalities. Only careful use of experience and memory, of past and present, can form the basis of our making the future worth having.

Like my dad’s and my fight over Lucy Winston and me was a building-block event, so was Bub’s and my first deer hunt in Modoc County with our father and his partners. That one in particular is a yesterday that’s still today. And without some yesterdays like that, todays never matter much and tomorrows seem likely to be grim.

Frederick Harold Hankerson’s nickname, Bub, was short for Bub-Baby, which was what I called him when we were small. Two years younger than I, he was a tall, skinny kid with a round, milk chocolate face like Mom’s, and sandy, kinky hair that gave his head a reddish cast, as if someone had sprinkled copper flakes or cinnamon all over it. At once my dearest friend and bitterest enemy, he was still a little spoiled (having been a sickly child) and something of a cry baby when we went on that hunt. I always whipped him when we fought, but he always told Mom or the Old Man, and one of them always whipped me for whipping him. That cycle seemed to keep all our relationships clear.
Everyone knew me as Satch, a name the Old Man had picked out for me long before I was born. When he was a boy, he had seen Satchel Paige pitch in the old Negro Baseball Leagues, and had vowed then to name his first son after Paige. I didn’t much like “Satch,” though I too came to think of my namesake as an important black hero, but it was better than my given name—Alvin. Alvin Carter Hankerson. By the time we made that first trip to Modoc, I was already five-foot-ten and stocky, destined to have the Old Man’s height and the bulk that came from Mom’s side of the family.

Bub was in eighth grade. I was a sophomore at Monterey High. When we told our teachers that we’d be gone for up to three weeks on a big game hunting trip with our dad, they seemed a little shocked that he’d keep us out of school so long, but they didn’t object. After all, we both were passable though not outstanding students, and the Old Man pastored the largest black congregation on the Peninsula. Some of our teachers knew him and felt he’d most likely do right by his sons.

I turned fifteen and Bub thirteen that year of our first hunt. Every year before that, when the Old Man had come home from hunting, we had excitedly helped unload and store the equipment. The heavy, oily guns in their leather cases smelled of cleaning solvent as we carried them into the house, careful to point their muzzles straight up or straight down. The tents and sleeping bags puffed out clouds of red dust when we cleaned them before storing them in the basement underneath the garage. The hunting clothes gave off aromas of sage brush and mullein, and animated the whole experience with a thrilling wildness.

Our father had carefully and methodically prepared us for hunting. On countless Saturday afternoons he had taken us to the Salinas River bottom out past the Main Garrison of Fort Ord to practice shooting our .22 rifles. We got so that most of the time we could hit a cottontail from 50 yards away, before it could dart behind a bush, or a groundhog before it could dive into its hole. We could shoot.

The Old Man had also taken us up into Los Padres National Forest at the foot of Carmel Valley to train us. Outside of Princess Camp, which was just below Chews’ Ridge and just above Tassajara
Spring, he had taught us how to move quietly through the woods, how to tell the time of day and take our bearings from the sun, and how to read game movements by their tracks and sign. And he had taught us how to pitch and trench our tent, how to build and keep a fire going, and how to find fresh water.

I remember one weekend the three of us were camped up on Chews’ Ridge, hunting squirrels and scouting around for wild pigs. About midafternoon on Saturday, I got bored because we hadn’t found anything to shoot at, so I took a shot at a magpie riding up toward us on the warm drafts out of the canyon below. I missed, so it just bounced up higher on the breeze and sailed behind a tree. But the Old Man got mad and chewed me out anyway.

“Don’t do that Satch,” he said. “First, you shouldn’t shoot a rifle out across a canyon like that. Those bullets travel a long ways an could kill someone you can’t even see on that other side over there.”

He sat down on a rock, propping his own rifle against his leg so its barrel pointed straight up into the air. Then he said, “The second thing is that magpies are protected. You can’t shoot ’em. Game warden would fine you if he caught you shootin at a magpie. Besides, they’re good for the forest ’cause they eat dead animals an help clean up the woods that way.”

“But they eat bird’s eggs too, don’t they?” Bub asked.

“Yeah, sometimes, but thas part a what they s’posed to do. Main thing, though, is they’re scavengers so we don’t shoot ’em. See, there’s laws about huntin an then there’s rules. Laws tell ya’ what kinds a licenses ta have, what kinds a guns ta shoot an things like that. Rules tell ya not ta leave no mess in your campsite, an ta share your game, an ta be careful with your gun, an like that. Good men an good hunters like I want you boys ta be go by both. We hunt in season, we kill legal game, an we eat what we kill. Thas natural. We don’t cheat in no way. We don’t kill things just to kill ’em. Fact a business, not even wild animals do that. Lions an bears an what not don’t jes kill other animals to be killin ’em. They kill for food, an so do we. Thas nature’s way.”

He slid down off his rock and walked a ways up the ridge, beckoning for us to follow. We walked up to a clearing from which we
could see a long way down the canyon to our right and out toward the Pacific forty miles away on our left. In the hazy light, the canyon we were on and the canyon behind it and the one behind that one looked purple, and the individual trees turned into timber that traced the bumpy outlines of the ridges. Out toward the ocean, the mountains disappeared into the gray under the sinking sun, signaling the fog bank rolling eastward. The Old Man scanned the ridges, canyons and horizon east and west for a moment. Then he swung his arm in a wide arc and said,

“Ain’t that beautiful? God’s handiwork. Mountains, canyons, ocean, trees, sky, animals. All God’s work. Men call it nature, but it’s God’s work. Everything in its place, doin what the Lord made it ta do. All them trees droppin cones an seeds are doin what they was made ta do.” His face broke into a grin, “Them squirrels an pigs we been tryin ta find been hidin from us ’cause God put that in ’em. They know people are dangerous to ’em, so they hide. Folks sometimes don’t like to give God the credit, but what they call nature is God’s work. Ya might say that bein out here the right way is worshippin God.”

The next thing he did startled Bub and me so much that we just stared at him. He stood in a wide-legged crouch, slung his gun strap over his shoulder, cupped his mouth with his hands and hollered down the canyon,

“Whooeee! Whooeee! Whooeee!”

The echo came back,

“Ooeee! Oooee! Ooee!”

Then he turned toward the ocean and did the same thing,

“Whooeee! Whooeee! Whooeee!”

He let his hands down to his sides and said,

“Sometimes there ain’t nothin else ta do but ta holler.” After a moment of confused silence, while Bub and I stood there dumb-founded, trying to grasp what had gotten into our father, the Old Man moved down off the hill mumbling, as if to himself,

“Les go pull camp so we can get on home for church tomorra.” My brother and I glanced quickly at each other and fell in behind him.

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The most important thing of that summer happened on Bub’s birthday. The Old Man took us to Rasmussen’s Sports Shop in downtown Monterey and bought us new deer rifles. He gave each of us a Model 99 .250-3000 Savage lever action rifle, complete with Redfield peep sight and leather carrying case with soft, wooly lining inside. Shoulder straps made the guns easy to carry, and they looked wonderful—long, sleek and efficient. There was something elegant about them. The Old Man said they were serious firearms, and he showed us how to aim through the peeps so that despite the difference in power and recoil of the new rifles, we quickly became just about as accurate with them as we had been with the .22s.

We rodded them out, oiled the cartridge cylinders and actions and wiped down the blue steel barrels and smooth, dark, wood stocks before putting them away after every outing. We assumed nonchalant manners when we bragged to our friends about our new guns and our upcoming hunt.

“Well, I tell you, my man, if that buck jumps up so I can put that Redfield on his behind and squeeze that Savage off, he can forget it, Jack. Liver for dinner, and that’s for real.” We couldn’t have been more eager.

Back in those days, even little hunting trips for cottontails and groundhogs always started in my feelings, in my dreams and fantasies, long before it was time to leave the house. They still do. So it’s not surprising that the weekend before we left for Modoc, we worked day and night getting our things together. And we thought and talked and dreamed only of going hunting.

To our old man, gear was life. Material things were like life-blood to him. He was especially vulnerable to gadgets that were the newest thing on the market, and ones that seemed to be bargains. He’d buy stuff and throw it into a closet or onto a shelf and forget about it for months, sometimes years. I just know that after this funeral business is over, when Claudia and I will help Mom go through his things, we’ll find cases of motor oil, tools still unused in boxes, even stuff he didn’t know how to use but bought thinking it might come in handy someday. God! The Old Man and his gear.
Preparing for a hunt was a critical part of the whole ritual, and there was lots to do getting ready for Bub’s and my first big deer hunt. We packed warm, tough hunting clothes in duffel bags. We stacked the tents, Coleman stoves and lanterns, tools, pots and pans, sleeping bags, and all the rest of the gear—much of it army surplus equipment from Fort Ord—in piles in front of the garage. Mom, my cousin Willie Mae, and some of the sisters from the church had baked for days; filling up a 30-gallon cardboard barrel with cookies, brownies and fried turnovers, some apple and some apricot, with flaky crusts and smooth, delicious fillings. The Old Man had topped off the boxes of food by bringing home 15 pounds of fresh pig’s feet, ’cause the first night’s dinner on a hunt was always boiled pig’s feet in a spicy tomato sauce spread over white rice. Finally, everything was ready to load into the big Dodge Weapons Carrier.

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Besides Bub and me, there were to be five others on that trip, so we’d be an efficient hunting party. First, there was the Old Man, the leader of the hunt, Booker T. Hankerson. Most people called him “Reverend,” or “Rev.” I’d sometimes get embarrassed by my family’s practice of naming children after famous black figures, but few people ever made jokes or messed around with my dad’s name. They didn’t call him “Book,” or “B.T.,” or “Hank,” or anything like that. He’d say, “I’m Reverend Booker T. Hankerson,” and that would be all. Mom, whose name was Sarah, called him “Papa,” and Bub and I called him “the Old Man” behind his back and “Dad” to his face. He was 40 and big.

“Six-foot-four, two-thirty,” he’d say.

He stood so straight and erect that he seemed taller than his height—tall enough to see over things someone else equally tall couldn’t. He could have been one of those African princes whose pictures I’d seen in books at the library—a tall, Tutsi chieftain or a Zulu warrior with a large, supple body capable of enormous strength, agility, and speed.

Next, there was Augustus Carl, the Old Man’s number one sidekick. Also 40, and known by most people as Deke, but by his wife as Gus, he was my height, five-foot-ten, and weighed in at two-
sixty. Deke was a carpenter, and generally what the Old Man called “handy.” He could fix machines and do all sorts of work with his hands, and he thought that all men worth anything should be able to do the same. He was shiny-black, and when he brushed his hair back and slicked it down with Murray’s grease, it was hard to tell where the skin stopped and the hair started on his high forehead. His smooth skin needed shaving only once a week. And he had a clear, tenor voice he tried to make husky and deep when he wanted to sound stern.

He was head deacon in the Old Man’s church. They were good friends and close spiritual brothers. He called the Old Man “Doc,” and the Old Man called him “Deke.” Bub and I and our cousins Spats and Earl used to make fun of them. We stood like they did, imitated their gestures and talked “Doc” and “Deke” when we thought they wouldn’t catch us. We said they looked like the Cisco Kid and Pancho, and we enjoyed Deke’s high-pitched “hee-hee-hee” of a laugh. He was a funny guy.

One of the other three to go on that trip was Reverend William Perkins, called “Unca Billy,” one of the Old Man’s preacher friends from Stockton. We picked him up on our way through the San Joaquin Valley. Then there was my cousin Smitty, Theodore Smith, who helped Deke drive the truck. Last, there was Joe Willis, the white guy in our party, who rode with us in the Old Man’s car.

The Old Man and Joe got to be friends when they both had been on the Monterey Peninsula only a little while. Both were young and poor, both had growing families, and both were pretty fair shade-tree mechanics. So they fixed people’s cars for extra money. At the time of that Modoc trip, Willis ran a wrecking yard and lived in a back corner of it with his grouchy, stringy-haired wife and four of his five kids. He always drove a different car, whichever wreck ran best at the moment. When she discovered Willis was going with us, Mom, who wasn’t afraid to speak her mind and who didn’t much like white people anyway, said she couldn’t see why the Old Man bothered to hunt with him. She said,

“Why you takin him? That po paddy ain’t got no money. He oughta be keepin himself here to work and take care of all them
little ole scrawny kids he got ’stead of runnin off to no deer hun- tin!” The Old Man answered,

“Well, Mama, you know I’m saved, an the Bible teaches us to treat everybody nice. Brother Willis loves to hunt, an he’s still grievin over his girl, so I don’t mind the little bit extra it costs to take him along. I’m just glad the Lord blessed me to be able to do it.” That settled it because neither Mom nor anyone else challenged the Old Man’s authority when he went deep on them and called out the Spirit or the Bible.

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About two in the afternoon of the Sunday before we were to leave, Deke came over to help us load the Weapons Carrier. Bub and I handed the gear up to him and the Old Man, who placed it in the truck so we could unload the camp stuff in the order that we would need it. They were laughing and talking as they worked. At one point, Deke asked the Old Man,

“Doc, you reckon Brotha Willis gon be up to this trip since it ain’t been but a few months since he los his girl?” The Old Man replied,

“He’s still grievin pretty bad, but I think he’ll be all right.”

“That sho was sad ’bout his daughter.”

“Yeah,” said the Old Man. “Jes shows how when folks turn their backs on God, their lives end up in a mess. An that girl wasn’t but eighteen years old. Almos every time I see Brother Willis, he still cries an tells me what happened all over again like I didn’t know. Jes bawls like a baby.”

“Ya know,” he continued, “that gal used to belong to Reverend Nystrom’s church, an my boys knew her from school. At least Satch did.” After giving each other a glance since we already knew the story, and masking our impatience poorly, Bub and I sat down on the duffel bags to listen and wait. My dad settled into his story-telling voice and manner.

“She wasn’t but sixteen years old when she left home, but she looked a lot older ’n that, an she was fast. Name of Charlene. They called her Sissie. The boy’s name was Ben, Ben Mott, from down around Dos Palos somewhere. He was ’bout ten years older ’n she was, an a cop.”
“Kine of a tall, red-haired kid, wasn’t he?” Deke interrupted.

“Yeah. Big ol’ boy. Willis claims Ben an the girl met while he was in the MPs out at Fort Ord. He useta go to Reverend Nystrom’s church some too. His mama an daddy is saved. Him an the gal got to sneakin ’roun, an Willis ’nem didn’t find out till way afterwards. All of a sudden, one day the girl borrowed one of Willises’ ole cars to go to Salinas looking for work at Sears’ or somewhere. Next thing they knew, she’d done ran off an married the boy. Moved in with his family down in the San Joaquin Valley. I mean, she left her clothes, her family, her home, the church, left everything an everybody. Jes left. Left Willis’s car parked at the bus depot.

“Things rocked on, rocked on, with Ben here in the army an Charlene down there ’roun Dos Palos. Went on for close to two years, until he got out the army an went down to work on his daddy’s farm. That was sometime early this pas summer.”

“Didn’t have no kids, did they, Doc?”

“She was carryin one when it happened,” the Old Man answered.

Right then, Mom came out onto the back porch with a bundle of rags and towels for us to take.

“Where you want these, Papa?”

“We’ll take ’em up here. Take that bag from your mama, will you, Satch?”

“Sure.”

Anxious to get on with the loading, I leaped up to get the bundle. Bub got up too and started fooling around with the ropes on the truck’s canvas tarp.

“Willis says they started havin trouble soon as the boy went home,” the Old Man resumed. “Fact of business, Sissie came back here to the Peninsula an stayed with her mama an daddy a coupla different times. Look like the boy went kinda crazy. Couldn’t take bein outta the army. Willis says he’d put on his uniform an gun an then drive ’roun fast in a jeep he bought. Then he got to drinkin heavy. His folks tried to get him to stop, but I guess they didn’t do no good.

“Then one night, him an the girl was drinkin an playin cards with some friends. Jes another man an his wife—sittin in the
kitchen of their friends’ house playin cards. Ben an Sissie got to arguin over the cards, an he got mad. Jumped up from the table cussin an went outside. They thought he went out to cool off, but he went out an got his pistol. He walked back in the door an didn’t say nothin to nobody. Shot his wife in the head an the other man in the heart. Killed ’em both dead on the spot. Then hopped in his jeep an tore out.”

I don’t know how many times I’d heard that story, but it still gave me an empty feeling. I could see the smoky little kitchen. I could hear the shots and smell the blood. I could see the bod- ies sprawled out on the floor and the other wife struck dumb. I thought about Charlene and remembered her chesty, curvy build. Deke said in a hushed voice,

“Unh, unh, unh. They don’t know how come he done it?”

“Naw. Don’t nobody know for sure. You don’t never really find out why folks do that kinda stuff. Devil jes gits in ’em. They figure he thought the other boy an his wife was foolin ’round. They found him the next day parked down in one of the cotton fields on his daddy’s farm. He’d put the gun muzzle in his mouth an blowed his brains out. An that was the end of that.

“Willis an his wife was all tore up. I went to the girl’s funeral, an then I went to pray with ’em two or three times after that. Las time I went, I invited him to go huntin with us. He jes held onto my hand an cried an cried. Seem like the spirit moved me to take him along.”

“Unh, unh, unh,” Deke said again.

All of us were quiet. Then the Old Man abruptly slid down off the truck’s tailgate.

“C’mon, man,” he said. “We got to git this stuff loaded if we goin huntin.”